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# ETCHING OF A TORMENTED AGE

A Glimpse of Contemporary  
Chinese Literature

by

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*London*

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# Etching of a Tormented Age

FAREWELL, OLD CURIOSITY SHOP!

SINCE 1911, the life of the Republican Chinese has undergone a transformation, perhaps unique in history. The civilization of ancient China was like a great river running quietly through a valley of virgin mountains. There had been vicissitudes, but nothing had affected any change in its course. It had been left alone until the end of the last century when this river, against its will, encountered the ocean of world culture. Terrific turmoil resulted, which became swollen into a tumultuous rapid known as the Literary Revolution. The collapse of the Manchu Empire was almost immediately followed by the abandonment of the age-hallowed classical style. The vernacular was adopted in its stead. Before that, the only official and academic language in use was couched in the classical style. No one could hope to pass the imperial examinations, the only stepping-stone to any decent career, without being steeped in this style. But the classical was immeasurably different from the spoken language. It usually took a good quarter of a lifetime to master its rudiments. Hence, it was almost inaccessible to the man-in-the-street. This fact alone was insufferable to the Republican Chinese. It meant that the great masses of China had scant prospect of education in any near future, while the Republic urgently needed the support of intelligent citizens. It meant that China would have to sail on in picturesque junks while others kept fortifying ever new

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types of powerful guns on board their battleships. No science had a chance of development if the people were to be perpetually tethered to the white elephant. Threatened by a neighbour that was being rapidly modernized, the young Chinese reacted sensibly rather than sentimentally.

But the new style was not only more sensible. Being colloquial, it was more expressive and spontaneous. Republican sentiment was truly overflowing. Quite apart from aesthetic and linguistic considerations, the fact that this innovation answered the demands of the young Chinese sufficiently justified its existence. The revolt actually began in 1917 and reached its climax in the Students' Movement of May 4, 1919. In the same year, about four hundred newspapers and magazines appeared in this new style. In the following year, the Ministry of Education decreed that the vernacular was to be adopted in all text-books for elementary schools. This overwhelmingly successful reform has been proudly called the Chinese Renaissance. In so far as it was an attempt to democratize the written language as a result of individual awakening, it was a Renaissance—and the first in five thousand years!

Many people think that the introduction of scientific inventions from the West changed the outlook of China. But the translation of western literature in a broad sense, from Rousseau, Mill, Darwin, Spencer to Bertrand Russell, actually had more positive influence on the reforms. They taught Chinese intellectuals Science and Democracy: they revealed the basic rights of human beings. The overthrow of the imperial régime was a crowning success of political emancipation. The literary revolt was a refusal to copy the models of the ancients. In the words of Dr. Hu Shih, every age should

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have its own literature. The three principles expounded by the forerunners as aims of the movement were:

1. To destroy the painted, powdered and obsequious literature of the aristocratic few and to create the plain, simple and expressive literature of the people.
2. To destroy the stereotyped and monotonous literature of classicism and to create the fresh and sincere literature of realism.
3. To destroy the pedantic, unintelligible and obscurantist literature of the hermit and the recluse and to create the plain speaking and popular literature of a living society.

Why was China, a country with a glorious cultural background, living in proud seclusion from the rest of the world until the last century, so ready to succumb to such drastic changes? As a people, we are by no means free from bigotry. Only half a century ago, we still chose to sign sheaves of unequal treaties rather than face the stark realities of the world situation. But the nineteenth century had become a nightmare to us. It was a period filled with humiliation from abroad and corruption at home, accompanied by poverty, illiteracy, contagious diseases, all the poisons of a decayed empire. The foreign powers were all sharpening their carving knives. It was like treading on thin ice, not only the great empire but all its inhabitants were ready to sink into oblivion. The young Chinese were appalled by the fates of India and Korea. History was marching with unfaltering steps. Aware of the impending danger, they naturally grew impatient with traditions that bound the feet of their women and bent the backs of their men. Social conventions established and tolerated since the days of the Yellow Emperor were suddenly challenged. An unprecedented upheaval, political, social and cultural,

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took place. The new literature led, reflected and recorded this upheaval.

Yet it should be borne in mind that this "new" style was in fact not new. It was just the age-old mother tongue of the people, from mandarin to country maid. Except for a corner of the south-eastern coast, it has always been spoken by the bulk of the population. Actually from the tenth century on, a great body of magnificent literature had been written in this style, such as some of the Yü-lu of the Sung Dynasty, and certainly all our best novels. What Dr. Hu Shih, the leader of the movement, and his followers fought for was orthodoxy. And this was by no means easily achieved.

The triumph of the vernacular was not unchallenged. The diehard Lin Ch'in-nan wrote violent diatribes, from a satire, in which he maliciously caricatured Dr. Hu and other reformers, to a number of indignant letters. He wrote to the late Ts'ai Yuan-pei, then President of Peking University and guardian angel to the new movement, warning him that "It is against the natural course of human affairs to let expediency override the fundamental. There are advantages in western civilization, but let us not inflict ourselves with its vices." Wang Ching-hsüan, another old scholar, compared the young Chinese to fickle women who cast away their husbands as soon as they meet new lovers. He accused the reformers of servility because of their adoption of western punctuation. But the actual pressure came from conservatives who once or twice got control of the Peking government. Under various pretexts these banned several new books, such as the *Collected Essays* of Hu Shih in 1924. Again, by exploiting "entrance examinations" either for civil service or for college, they tried to impose the classical style on the younger generation.

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Hundreds of novels and thousands of poems and essays have been written in this democratic style in the last twenty-five years. They have eloquently shown its capacity to express all shades of human sentiment and to depict everything on earth, from a waterfall to the tremulous legs of an insect. The Chinese still love to see ancient scrolls of the Yangtse Gorges or pines spreading from dizzy crags on sacred T'aishan. But to-day there are motorboats steaming up the Yangtse and aeroplanes over T'aishan. While appreciating ancient scrolls, they realize the necessity of this more adequate medium to depict modern China. Hence, this living language has become the natural channel of contemporary Chinese writers. Twenty-five years is of course too brief a period for hasty critical verdicts. Contemporary Chinese literature is a sapling still in growth. Here, I shall attempt to give an account of this sapling.

## NOVELISTS AS REFORMERS

THRILLERS and purely humorous fiction play an extremely insignificant part in modern Chinese fiction. Novelists regard it as a disgrace to write merely for the sake of popular entertainment. While this may be a serious disadvantage to technique, it shows how conscientious our writers are. In fact, most of our novelists are social reformers at heart. In tracing their motives of writing, the desire to ameliorate a corrupt society is evident. The Japanese may know the value of ancient Chinese porcelain and bronze, but they fatally underestimated the new spirit of self-assertion in all articulate young Chinese and how politically conscious they had become. Merciless self-analysis of national weakness and indomitable assertion of individual rights were the guiding forces of contemporary Chinese writers. Take the widely-known Lu Hsün, author of *The True Story of Ah Q*. Actually he began his career as a medical student. This was because he had suffered much in his childhood from country quacks. He wanted to master the science of curing the ailments of his fellow-beings. One day in Tokio, at the end of a tedious anatomical lecture, the professor showed some non-medical lantern slides to amuse his students. One of these showed a group of Chinese who had acted as spies for the Russians in the Russo-Japanese War. They had been arrested and beheaded before a cheering crowd. Lu Hsün was cut to the quick. For it dawned on him that the disease of his compatriots was mental rather than physical. He gave up his medical career to become a writer. There was nothing rosy about the China he depicted. All his

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stories are caricatures of apathetic Chinese types, often bitingly effective.

There is no doubt that our finest literary harvest in modern times is that of fiction. And it is here that new writing contrasts most strikingly with the old. The change in the position of fiction in China is as surprising as that from a pauper to a prince. Thirty years ago, *Hsiao Shuo* (the Chinese for "fiction", meaning "small talk") was regarded as a low and vulgar form of writing. The handful of novels written between the tenth and the nineteenth centuries were mainly by scholars who had been banished from imperial favour, or else had failed in the imperial examinations. Hence, their authorship is often a matter for conjecture. The abolition of imperial examinations in 1904 and the introduction of western literature completely changed the situation. Fiction has since become a popular form of writing. While novels in the pre-Republican days were mere accidents, they are written with conscious and deliberate craftsmanship to-day.

The writers of new China take great pride in the hardships and vicissitudes of life. They are aware of the value of personal experience to a resourceful novelist. A life springing from the gutter may provide a wealthy store of material. Some of them were born in such humble conditions, some went out of their way to seek them. Whence, realism has become quite natural to modern Chinese writers. They are not only the reformers of a corrupt society; many of them were the victims of it. Miss Ts'ao Ming begins her *Confessions* thus: "In the first half of my ninth year, my pillow was seldom dry. I was the twenty-third child of a polygamous father, and my mother was his concubine. When I was ten years old, I was so peaky and thin that I looked like a girl of six. Often my mother clasped

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me tightly, playing with my queue and fondling my bony chin, saying, ‘It is hard to be a woman, and when one is so thin. . . .’” Miss Pai Wei in an autobiographical sketch pictured herself kneeling before her Confucian father, sobbing timidly, imploring him, “Father, give me a chance to study. Don’t marry me off so soon!” She was to be married to a boy whom she had never seen and who was already lying on his deathbed. Indeed her sufferings were cruel. She was stripped, beaten, and literally tortured by her mother-in-law. Later she ran away, and managed to enter a school, without her parents’ knowledge. But soon she was discovered.

In Ai Wu’s case, a vagabond life was chosen rather than imposed by circumstances. He trekked all the way from Ssüchuan to Yünnan, and thence to Burma. *En route*, he worked as a groom in a wayside inn in the wild mountains on the border. He was even a cook to a monk in Rangoon. Often he was driven out of his lodgings for arrears of rent. But all the time he carried with him a copy of Gogol’s *Overcoat*, a pen, and a bottle of ink swinging from a piece of rope. As he walked on mountainous journeys or swept up the dung of horses and mules, he carefully scrutinized the life around him. At night, by the faint light of an oil lamp, he jotted down the incidents of the day. There is in fact a quaint touch in his works beyond the reach of the more well-to-do.

The study of modern Chinese fiction can be approached from several angles. The regional novel has never been fully developed in China, partly because the tumultuous life never allowed any writer to settle down peacefully in one spot. But many Chinese writers naturally remain attached to the part of the country most intimate to them. In the works of Chou

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Wen, Sha Ting, and Lo Shu, you see all aspects of Ssüchuan —villainous country squires, helpless wives of peasants, salt merchants and opium smugglers. Lu Fen has graphically depicted the villages of his native Honan, the people's militia, drunkards, or missionary hospitals. Hsiao Chün, the author of *Village In August*, and his former wife Hsiao Hung, chose the whole of Manchuria for a background, from Harbin to Dairen. Writing about the guerrilla fighters in that part of the country, Hsiao Chün himself had been one. The setting of Tuan Mu Hung-liang's novels are naturally laid in the eastern part of Inner Mongolia, where he came from. In Wu Tsu-hsiang's stories, one sees the haggard faces of downtrodden tenants and the greed of the country gentry in Anhui. Nearly all the characters in Lu Hsün's works were taken from Wei Chuang, that town wherein the immortal Ah Q was born, lived and suffered. There are writers who sometimes use foreign countries as a background, either because of the exotic colour, as in the case of Hsü Ti-shan's India, Pa Chin's France, Ai Wu's Burma and the white Russian colony in Harbin as appearing in Chin Yi's works, or because of their lengthy sojourn, as in the case of Kuo Mo-jo's in Japan.

The danger of classifying writers geographically is obvious. To start with, provincialism has been deprecated by modern Chinese writers. Though Lu Hsün and Chou Tso-jen were brothers, their approach to life was totally different. In Chou, one sees the ripples of gentle streams and the waving shadows of bamboo groves. In Lu Hsün, one sees China struggling against the clutches of a decadent tradition. Nevertheless, it remains the garden of nostalgic memories. As an ingredient in the formation of a writer's character, this is also significant. Shen Tsung-wén, for instance, admitted the influence of the

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River Ch'êñ in West Hunan on his whole literary career. He wrote:

"The foundation of my work was not built on a bundle of useful books; it was built on water. The tiny raindrops from the eaves, a little brook, or the immense deep—these are all great teachers to me. My ability to use my little brain was wholly due to the influence of water. I owe to it the habit of seeing beneath the surface.

"In childhood, the river was my refuge. From the age of fifteen, for the next five years, my life was spent on the bank of the River Ch'en. Now, each time I recall my past, the happiest of my reminiscences are watery. At least one tenth of my time was squandered on the main currents and the tributary streams of the river. I learnt much about the human world from flowing water. My imagination was given wings by the river.

"After five years, I left that river. I could then wield the brush, and began to write. I have often used the riverside as my setting. I wrote about it with love. My characters are also those familiar faces on the river. If there is sadness in my writings, perhaps it was due to the gloomy weather in that corner of China fifteen years ago. If there is anything in my work worth noticing, it was also because people moving on that river spoke a rich and vivid language.

"After five years' sojourn in Peking, I went to live by the sea, the dazzling and boundless sea. I had a greater opportunity to see life from a remote angle. How lonely was the sea! It nourished my feeling of solitude, enlarged my soul and magnified my personality. . . ."

(From *Literature and I*, 1934, Shanghai.)

In whatever shape, water has always charmed our writers. Miss Ping Hsin, one of the first of our women writers in the vernacular, was profoundly influenced by the sea. Not being a navigating country, we have produced no Joseph Conrad.

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To a Chinese writer, the sea is oftener a lyrical symbol. To Miss Ping Hsin, it symbolizes mother love. She spent her girlhood in a delightful fishing town on the Chiao Chou Peninsula where she often sailed on the sea. In her *Letters to My Young Readers* from America, she constantly sings in praise of the sea. "To look at a range of mountains on a hot summer afternoon", she wrote, "is like looking at an enormous ailing ox, with layers of darkness piling in front of our eyes. But the sea is always lively and glimmering with thousands of silvery flowers. She is my mother and the lake is my friend."

In the transitional period of reforming the family system, the relationship between the sexes was bound to arouse acute interest and controversy. Every youth became aware of his innate right to choose his own life companion. But the tradition of marriage by betrothal was still unbroken. Few authors were without matrimonial troubles, and literary confessions of these became a vogue. The more erotic type, like Yü Ta-fu, went so far as to vent his "sexual hunger". Obviously there was an instinctive craving in the hearts of young Chinese, long denied or repressed by social and ethical codes. That craving was most frankly expressed by Yü who had many of the traits of Rousseau and Dostoevsky. In his *Recollections As A Writer*, he said all literary works were autobiographical. It was undoubtedly true in his own case. He packed his notorious *Nine Diaries* with all the sins he committed. At the end of each sin, he took a turkish bath to wash it off. His outstanding novel was *Sinking* ("Ch'en Lun"), an analysis of a morbid youth. In one passage he characteristically wrote:

"... O my decayed life at twenty! My dead ashes of twenty years! I'd sooner be transformed into a mineral. I shall never blossom in this incarnation. Knowledge I desire not, nor

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fame. I only yearn for a ‘heart’ that is tender and understanding —a fervid heart bursting with sympathy, and with love from that very sympathy. What I really crave is love! Were there a beautiful woman who understood my agony, and if she desired my immediate death, I am ready. If there were only a woman, beautiful or ugly, as long as she loved me with a true heart, I would sacrifice my life for her. What I crave is love of the other sex. . . .”

How naïve, yet how expressive of the mood of repressed souls!

Yü’s influence on the younger generation cannot be called good. But his emotions were genuine. Faithfully and without restraint, he expressed the particular sorrow of the youths of that time. But another novelist who chose nearly the same theme cannot be judged in the same light. Chang Tzǔ-ping must have deeply regretted his opportunism. Perhaps he has been cursing the ingratitude of his readers. Only fifteen years ago, his novels of triangular and quadrangular love affairs were manufactured by the dozens. They were devoured by boys and girls all over the country. Writing must have brought him considerable profit. His plots were as alike as two peas. His characters seemed to have one common virtue, namely, sensuality. The endings were invariably tragic, either suicide as a result of being in love with a married person or a sudden discovery of pregnancy by parents. These stereotyped situations were soon denounced by all critics and disillusioned even his most enthusiastic readers.

But the question of “family oppression” has not been completely solved, and it has never failed to interest Chinese readers. The success of Pa Chin’s novels is sound evidence of this. He is an anarchist whose uncompromising spirit has spoken much for the discontent of his generation. He has written scores of novels about miners and revolutionaries.

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His recent trilogy, *Spring, Autumn, Masses*, deals with the degeneration of a patriarchal family in Ssüchuan and the rebellion of the young. Pa Chin is a writer of conviction. While in France, he became a fervent student of the French Revolution. The spirit of *J'accuse* runs through his works. He writes to protest rather than to entertain. But he never makes any pretence to be an artist. In the Preface to his *Electric Chair*, he wrote:

"I have no liberty, no joy, because a whip constantly lashes me. I cannot rest. It is the misery of mankind, and my own. When passion burns in me, my heart becomes restless. I must write something. When I write, I exist no longer. Gruesome pictures haunt me. They make my heart and my hand tremble at the same time. What is art after all, if it cannot bring more light to humanity; if it cannot strike a single blow against the demon? The whole city of Pompeii was once buried under ashes. One day, the ivory tower of art will also be consumed. No, I want to make a direct appeal to my readers, make them abhor darkness and love light. My writings need no connoisseur . . . ."

This attack on the art-for-art's-sake group was more emphatically expressed in his *Recollections of My Life*:

"I am not lying when I say that part of my works are a mixture of tears and blood. I am no artist. My writing is just part of my existence. My life has been a painful struggle, my writing too. I write only about human aspirations. While I suffer, I envisage a rosy dawn for all mankind. Yes, life is short and art is long. But there is yet something longer than art and it is that which guides me."

Since 1927, the Northern Campaign of the Revolutionary Army, Chinese writers became more politically conscious. Personal introspection became less popular and novelists

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turned their eyes to a bigger canvas. Mao Tun was the first to attempt a monumental novel, portraying the revolution for which much blood had been shed. His *Disillusion*, *Mutation*, and *Pursuit* were a trilogy about that fateful year. Like André Malraux, the author of *La Condition Humaine* (translated into English as *Storm Over Shanghai*), Mao Tun was an active party member in Wuhan, then the seat of the Left-wing government. Being an enthusiastic disciple of naturalism, he drew his material from reality. This was followed by his *Twilight*, *A Romance of China in 1930*, in which he ambitiously presented a panorama of China, both rural and urban. An amazing feature of this novel is the graphic description of the Shanghai Stock Exchange. Some of his works tend to be documentary, but he has taught younger writers to explore actual life.

The portrayal of the seamy side of Republican life is a universal theme. Yeh Shao-chün vividly writes about school-teachers and middle-aged people, Chang T'ien-yi about civil servants and children. His *Knight of Yang Ching Pang* is one of our best picaresque novels. Miss Ting Ling's works are widely known. Her *In Darkness* and *The Mother* won many plaudits. Miss Ling Shu-hua has written a number of delightful stories. Being a painter herself, and the wife of Professor Ch'êng Hsi-ying, a learned but not pedantic critic, her creative talent is further enhanced by scholarship. I do not wish to pay all-round compliments to our women writers, but I really cannot omit Miss Lin Hui-yin, the author of *Ninety-nine Degree* and other charming stories. Being a versatile artist herself and a lover of experimental writers such as Virginia Woolf, she has made fiction a record of rapid flashes of life instead of static "facts". She has fished beneath the sea of consciousness and thus deepened the effect of her writing.

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From 1916 to the formation of the League of Left Wing Writers in 1930, anything written in the vernacular style seemed acceptable. The criterion tended to be more linguistic than artistic. During the period of revolutionary literature, Left-wing critics were mostly concerned with ideology. Wang Shu-ming, one of the leading critics of the time, wrote how he became a literary critic: "I bade farewell to all the aesthetic theories of a capitalist society and made careful studies of socialism." Art was then contemptuously dismissed as "technique". Consequently many stories appeared bare skeletons of revolutionary tales or dramatizations of certain political ideas.

Shên Tung-wên has often been described as a stylist. It is true that his choice of words is so deliberate that they sparkle. In his stories, the prevalent mood is that of a poet. He admits that all he attempts is to capture momentary sensations and images. They are often impressionistically fresh. For instance, in describing a timid youth, he would say he was as shy as a little apricot tree. But Shên's essential virtue is that he writes of a world entirely of his own—soldiers, civil servants in the interior, peasants of West Hunan and the colourful tribesmen on the border. With his vivid pen he enlivens them all, their rich dialogue, their picturesque lives and their tragedies. He was born and bred among them. As a soldier, then as a tax-collector, he trod every inch of the soil. In his Preface to *Blue Jade Blue Jade* (an English translation by Miss Emily Hahn and Shao Hsün-meï appeared in the *T'ien Hsia Monthly*, Hongkong) he explains his creative attitude:

"For peasants and soldiers, I cherish an inexpressible love. This emotion is in all my writings. I never conceal it. I was born in the little town I write about. My grandfather, father,

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and brothers were all in the army. All died on active service. The living will end their lives in the same manner. This is the side of life I am most familiar with. I write about their loves and hates, their joys and sorrows. Clumsy as my pen is, it cannot distort too much, for these people are honest, straightforward, commonplace but big-hearted. In temperament, sometimes very beautiful, sometimes very petty. In the senseless civil wars lasting nearly twenty years, these peasants were the foremost sufferers. Their souls have been heavily oppressed, which has done much to destroy their original simplicity, industry, frugality, peacefulness and honesty. They have been transformed into quite a different kind of being, lazy and poverty-stricken. I am trying to record this dreadful transformation."

The war has been a blessing in disguise for Chinese literature in general, and for fiction especially. Previously, two lamentable symptoms existed among nearly all story-writers. They either lacked solid experience of national life or their diction was too remote from that of the people. The war has shown many writers the right direction. For the first time they inhaled the aroma of rice fields and saw the gorgeous orange groves, and the manifold marvels of the countryside. But above all, they came in direct contact with the people, the people untouched by European influence, who lived far away from the coastal ports. Beyond all this, they saw the war, its tragedy as well as its heroism. Consequently, we may hope for much from post-war Chinese novelists.

## POETRY: AT THE CROSSROADS

THE modern Chinese poet has appeared to be very fidgety. The question of "form" has been an eternal paradox. When the poet feels like a nightingale, he longs to get rid of any restraining patterns. But when he realizes that poetry, like painting, needs to be framed, his desire for acquiring such a frame is equally strong. So many poetical forms have been invented and tested, either by individuals or by groups of writers. So far, no conclusion of any kind has been reached.

Dr. Hu Shih may be called the first vernacular poet. His pioneer collection of verses was entitled "Experiments", which appeared early in 1920. The early poems were nearly all experimental. Often they were composed with the flimsiest feelings and appear uncouth in form. There was every attempt to democratize poetry but scarcely any to enoble it. However, their merit lies not so much in versification as in their revolutionary audacity. Except for men of great genius, Chinese prosody had for centuries been a very rigid yoke. Its metrical rules had become mechanical and its images hackneyed. The Experimentalists emancipated Chinese poetry from the traditional bondage. But in doing so, they also eliminated the frontier between poetry and prose.

Another achievement of the Experimentalists was to broaden the range of poetical themes. In the past, Chinese poetry seemed to exist only to celebrate "the wind, the flowers, the snow and the moon". While this concentration on nature explains why many of our classical poets are still enjoyed to-day, even outside of China, it certainly did not

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suit the Republican Chinese, who wished literature to play its part in the social movement. There was also the strong desire to explore new pastures. With their prose-like poetry, they broke the traditional limitations of subject-matter, thus freeing future poets to write as the spirit moved them. A few poets addicted to notoriety filled their lines with political or erotic verbiage. But on the whole, nature's reflection on the human mind is still the favourite theme of Chinese poets.

This complete emancipation from form was soon found to be uncomfortable. Like a prima donna, poetry needed to be dressed, elegantly or magnificently. It began to feel ashamed of its nudity. A cloak was obviously in demand. Hsü Chih-mo, the leading poet of the Crescent Moon Society, and himself well read both in English and Chinese poetry, started the movement to restore musical qualities to verse. He made various bold attempts to introduce English metres into Chinese poetry, from Elizabethan sonnets to Byronic stanzas. Mr. Harold Acton, in his unique volume of *Modern Chinese Poetry* (Duckworth, London, 1936), wrote:

"When Hsü was consciously introducing the western rhapsody, he rushed to the antipodes of classical Chinese poetry, wallowing in overstatement and repetition and cumbering his lines with exuberant images which here and there ring false, here and there are exquisite. By exquisite we mean that they have that perfection of purely Chinese refinement which can only be communicated to foreigners by visual means, such as the finest examples of cut jade. Rhythmic vitality Hsü possessed; discipline, alas, he lacked."

The poets of the Crescent Moon Society, besides translating William Blake, Paul Valéry and other foreign masters, produced a number of original poets, such as Wen Yi-to, the

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author of *Dead Water*, Ch'êñ Mêng-chia and Pien Chih-lin. But the newly adapted frame became mechanical before it was well shaped. The symmetrical stanzas were sarcastically nicknamed "soya-bean-cake". The rigid sonnet seemed especially unpalatable to Chinese poets. So another mutiny began. This time, the impetus came from Walt Whitman and the French symbolists. Kuo Mo-jo, the leader of the Creation Society, revolted against it because his self-expression was strangled by such rigid forms. Instead of writing formal lines, weighing auditory and visual images of each word, he let his emotions pour forth in a passionate flood. For instance, he curses the modern metropolis thus:

"O pulse of the great city!  
Throbs of life!  
Beating, blowing and shouting,  
Gushing, flying and jumping.  
The horizon is veiled in mist!  
My heart leaps out of my mouth!"

(Modern Chinese Poetry, p. 87.)

The Creation Society first heralded romanticism, then socialism. In all activities, the versatile Kuo played the dominant part. During the "romantic period", he assiduously translated the *Rubá'iyát*, *Faust*, and *Shelley* into verse. He wrote stories, plays, poems and literary criticism. The profuse passion in his poems did not please critics of the Anglo-American school, such as Professor Liang Shih-chi'u who preferred restraint and decorum to inspiration. But that did not prevent Kuo from becoming popular. He was, in fact, regarded as a hero. What he revolted against was not only the rigidity of form imposed on free spirits. Like Lu Hsün, he revolted against the extravagant delicacy and dandism of the

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Ivory Tower clique. But when the ivory was replaced by cheaper material, while remaining a tower, popular support was gradually withdrawn. However, I cannot help thinking that the "Poems for Recitation" which have become so popular a product of the Sino-Japanese war are a revival of Kuo's poems in the twenties.

Another group of rebels against "form" was of an aristocratic type. They seemed to hate form as much as lucidity. Li Chin-fa, a sculptor who had studied in Paris, was a fervent disciple of the French symbolists. With his magical fingers, he tried to chisel some verses. The result was that he created a new type of poem, filled with exotic images, remote metaphors, and frequent allusions to European mythology. Since the success of the vernacular, he was the first writer who did all he could to mingle the vernacular with the classical. In the long run, Li's influence was beneficial. He extended the vocabulary of the "plain language". But what struck his readers most was his images. Often they were sensual, as in his "Tenderness":

"With my presumptuous finger,  
I feel the warmth of your skin.  
The young deer went astray in the wood,  
While only the scent of the dead leaves remains."

Sometimes his lines showed a great tendency to contemplation, tinged with morbidity. He was very fond of antiquity, unlike most of the early rebels. However, the antiquity that he buried himself in was more European than Chinese. In *Never to Return*, he begins:

"Go off, my lad,  
To the cities of yore  
—They sleep in the night of centuries.

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The streams sing monotonous songs,  
Like the sighs of an Oriental poet,  
Their hearts were like rocks,  
Thickly covered with moss. . . .”

Though Li himself went back to sculpture, this type of poem continued to develop. Combined with the later influence of Paul Valéry and T. S. Eliot, it flourished through the works of Tai Wang-shu, Pien Chih-lin and Ho Chi-fang. They maintained free verse as a form and the imagery of impressionism. The poetic content, however, became even more elusive. They are sometimes so suggestive that only readers capable of very far-reaching associative powers could read between the cryptic lines. Liu Hsi-wei, the impressionistic critic, made many successful adventures among the souls of contemporary authors. He tried, in his gaudy style, to interpret Pien's “Round Treasure Casket”. Seizing the stanza:

“Never enter any watchmaker's shop,  
To hear your youth nibbled away.  
Never go to any antique shop,  
To buy the trinkets of your grandpa . . .”

the adventurer imagined that the “treasure casket” symbolized the present, a bridge over the past and the future. When he reached the stanza:

“The moon has adorned your window,  
And you somebody's dream,”

he concluded that the poet interpreted life as an embellishment. Poets usually are too aloof to speak to critics. But Pien could not contain himself. In an open letter to the sweating critic, he told him that he was “completely mistaken”. The poet was thinking of relativity.

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That Chinese readers complained of the growing ambiguity of the new poetry was only natural. Sometimes they blamed M. Paul Valéry, sometimes Mr. T. S. Eliot. The Japanese warplanes destroyed our people and buildings. They have also destroyed that ivory tower which the more privileged intellectuals in China had been building. In many ways, the aesthetes had helped to deepen the vernacular literature which was founded by people more socially than artistically conscious. The attempt to deepen it was natural and had been beneficial up to a point. But in view of the vast illiterate population, it was undoubtedly an oasis. The war has killed much literature for the introvert, but it has widened the horizon, and breathed vitality fresh from the good earth.

## DRAMA: A LOUDSPEAKER

IT is no exaggeration to say that the modern drama is a complete departure from the traditional drama. Plays with realistic scenery and dialogue in the daily spoken language are the orthodox form to-day, but were entirely foreign some thirty years ago. The conventional stage art was the equivalent of opera and ballet combined. Unlike other forms of vernacular literature, the modern Chinese drama originated in adaptations of European plays. The first experiment was *La Dame Aux Camélias* in 1907, followed by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The choice was not difficult to explain. Young Chinese were then suffering acutely from parental oppression, especially where marriage was concerned, while they were bound to sympathize with the downtrodden Negroes. When a foreign play, with all its exotic appeal, reflected our own thoughts so much better than our native plays, it naturally provoked enthusiasm. The same was true of the popularity of Lady Gregory's *Rising of the Moon* after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. But it was Ibsen's plays which led the young Chinese dramatists to the highway—the road of social reform.

The influence of Ibsen was not confined to our dramatists. As a social critic, an uncompromising rebel against conventions, he won the heart of every Chinese writer. For a time, "problem plays" shared the vogue of "problem novels". From this Norwegian dramatist, Chinese writers learned that the highest mission of the drama was to expose the defects and reveal the absurdities of existing society. One playwright apologetically wrote in an epilogue: "Although this play is worthless in

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technique, I am glad to say that it has dealt with marriage and rural bankruptcy, the two cardinal problems of the day." In those days, it sounded convincing enough. The People's Theatre, in its opening announcement in 1921, declared: "The age to look down upon drama as a form of recreation has definitely passed. The modern theatre is a wheel to push forward social progress and a microscope to detect the diseases of our environment. It is a pitiless mirror in which all the seamy sides of our community life should be reflected."

In the course of transformation, dualism was unavoidable. Many early vernacular poems were really paraphrases of classical verse. The essayists did not even bother to make a thorough change in diction. Stock phrases used in the classics appeared from time to time, betraying the tenacity of human inertia. In the first period of modern Chinese drama, roughly between 1907 and 1915, the new plays were known as "reformed plays" (*wēn ming hsi*). It was just the very beginning of the breakaway from an agelong tradition. The vital force of this period was the Spring Willow Society formed in 1907 by Chinese students in Tokio. Later, they toured the Yangtse valley and innumerable dramatic societies sprang up all over the country.

Most of these societies were anxious to make the new drama a success; at the same time they wanted it to serve as a loudspeaker for the emancipation movement. The blend of these twin motives was somewhat clumsily managed. Unfortunately, having broken off with the operatic tradition, the sole virtue of the new drama they grasped was the employment of plain dialogue. Except for some theatrical improvements, such as the ban on the shouting of "bravo, bravo!" in the middle of a play, which was the custom of old-fashioned audiences, the contribution of *wēn ming hsi* to dramatic

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art was negligible. In fact, they sometimes even disposed of any written text. Actors and actresses were barely told the plot and what respective rôles they were to impersonate. This resulted in the divorce of *wén ming hsi* from literature, and the more conscientious members left the group and became serious students of drama, such as Ou-yang Yu-chi'en, who later became actor, director and playwright. The rest went into vaudeville which still survives in modern Shanghai, producing endless "serial plays" such as *Fire Over The Red Lily Abbey*, with demi-gods flying about the stage.

During this period Chinese dramatists seemed to be hesitating at the crossroads. The "National Drama" school argued that our traditional operatic singing and symbolic scenery were really unique in the world. They were impressionistic and rhythmic, while western realistic plays were merely mimic shows. At the other extreme, there were those who advocated abolishing the old form. Their contention was that singing could not possibly express the complicated feelings of modern man and that there was too much feudalism in the conventional drama. One thorough-minded critic curtly remarked that before establishing a republic, we had to overthrow the empire. Hence, to establish the new drama, all opera houses in the country should be closed at once. But there was yet a third group who, while admitting that traditional operas conflicted with the spirit of realism which was the backbone of vernacular literature, thought the traditional drama should be preserved as a form of entertainment for particular audiences and as an historic art for the student. This view was first expressed by the late Professor Liu Fu who must have seen the glories of western opera in Paris. The *Academia Sinica* and other cultural institutions have done much

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to preserve and develop this traditional art. The visits of Mei Lan-fang to America and Moscow and of Ch'êng Yen-chi'u to Europe were great events. But the orthodoxy of modern literary drama has definitely been established.

The decline of *wén ming hsi* taught the country a valuable lesson. To build a solid foundation for the new drama, we needed playwrights. Another reaction to their failure was the attempt to make drama entirely non-professional, so as to dissociate themselves from the vaudeville stage. "We refuse to be directed from the booking-office!" they solemnly declared. Many plays have been written by Hsiung Foo-hsi, Ch'êng Ta-pei and Hung Shênn. *The Three Rebellious Women* of Kuo Mo-jo was a great success in combining modern ideas with historical themes. The late Hsü Chih-mo collaborated with his wife in a beautiful symbolic play, *The Pien K'un Hill*. Ting Hsi-ling's pleasantly satiric plays show the influence of A. A. Milne. Indeed, most dramatists, with the "problem play" in mind, worked quite independently of their audience. The settings were often laid in some corner of the social inferno, a polygamous family or a village with a villainous squire. A play frequently meant a torrent of yelling and complaint against social evils. Then, the exposure and the cold but undramatic analysis of the social evil concerned, often in the form of a sermon. The more naïve ones often ended with an idealist, holding a burning torch as he gazed with shining eyes towards the distant but rosy future.

In this immature stage, dramatic education was already progressing. The "New China Dramatic Society" in Peking had a membership of two thousand with forty-eight affiliated organizations. The Peking College of Fine Arts founded its drama department in 1925 and the Jên Yi Drama School,

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though enjoying a brief life of ten months only, was perhaps the first school to devote itself to drama proper. These worthy attempts sowed seeds for the future Little Theatre Movement. A number of successful film actors were trained at that time. Another interesting development was the popularity of women appearing with men on the stage. It probably began with Hung Shêns adaptation of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in 1924. Before that, the part of Nora in Ibsen's *Doll's House* was always played by a man and it was regarded as an honour to be chosen for the rôle. In 1926, the adaptation of James Barrie's *Dear Brutus* scored a success. The Education Board of Kiangsu Province were so pleased that they addressed an encomium to the producer acknowledging that "It is a very valuable play, with subtle philosophical implications, teaching men to preserve their original personality".

The amateur dramatists succeeded in ridding the theatre of its mercenary character, but they also deprived it of the power to entertain. Admittedly, the monotony of a certain type of play bored even the most enthusiastic of its patrons. In 1921, Wang Chung-hsien experienced a blow. He produced *Mrs. Warren's Profession* in Shanghai to a non-student audience. The performance was conspicuously advertised in the newspapers, but the booking was barely half that of an ordinary variety show. And when Mrs. Warren began to relate her life story to Vivi in the second act, several fashionable ladies in the front stalls left the theatre—and not without grumbling. The good-humoured producer afterwards analysed his audience thus:

"Some wholly failed to understand what was happening on the stage, some understood but found the plot lacking surprise. There were those who had moral objections to Mrs. Warren herself, and others who disliked the excessive repe-

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tition of such new terms as the equality of the sexes. To those who had seen the play acted abroad, our acting left much to be desired."

As a conclusion, Wang suggested a compromise. He wanted to have plays "with simple but progressive ideas, dramatized in rather complex plots. Thus we can assure the intelligentsia that we are on the right track while sparing the non-intellectual audience from yawning."

When the Northern Campaign of the Revolutionary Army reached the Yangtse in 1926, Kuo Mo-jo and many other dramatists joined the steadily growing force. Drama again served as a loudspeaker. This was followed by the immense popularity of the *Nan Kuo Movement*. T'ien Han, the leader, wrote tens of plays during their itinerary performances up and down the Yangtse. They were mostly very sentimental plays. *The Tragedy on the Lake*, for instance, dealt with a frustrated love affair. It was often rumoured that a number of suicides had been caused by it. The production of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, with the courageous and talented Miss Yü Shan, was an outstanding success. Its violent erotic colour had a special appeal for the anti-Confucian younger generation of that time. But there was yet another foreign play which gained widespread popularity, namely, *Roar China!* a Soviet Russian play about the massacre of Wan Hsien.

The Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 did much to stimulate dramatic activities in China. Under a strict Government ban on anything anti-Japanese at the time, playwrights had to express their patriotism in veiled form. The Amateur Theatre in Shanghai made great strides in all aspects of the stage. Hsia Yen's *T'ai Ping Rebellion* was quite exceptional. They also produced a number of classical plays of the West,

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such as Gogol's *Inspector* and A. Ostrovsky's *Storm*. Their production of *Romeo and Juliet* was also remarkable. In the past years, there had been a number of Chinese who went abroad to study stage design and other branches of theatrical technique. The Amateur Theatre rallied their combined efforts. The most amazing thing about their success was that the plays were mainly left as in the original, except the dialogue, which was rendered into Chinese. Compared with the audience of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Chinese theatre-goers seemed also to have become infinitely more receptive to foreign forms.

But the most fundamental progress still lies in playwriting. In this respect, there is no doubt that Ts'ao Yü achieved the peak. Being a celebrated amateur actor in North China and a professor of literature, he happily blended stagecraft with scholarship. Beside this, he is one of the most original and brilliant writers of the day. At Tsing Hua University, Peking, he acquired a remarkable knowledge of European dramatic tradition, from Greek tragedies to the lyrical realism of Eugene O'Neill. His *Thunderstorm*, published and produced in 1936, was a memorable event. Technically it was the first full-length play, with a prologue and an epilogue superadded. But it was the dramatic force of this unusual tragedy that achieved an unprecedented popularity. Hundreds of performances of this play were given by the Travelling Dramatic Society and it was very soon adapted for the films. This was followed by *Sunrise* and two others. Ts'ao Yü was a profoundly conscientious playwright. He demonstrated how one can benefit from Europe without being Europeanized. Yet he has not fully succeeded in reconciling his artistic with his social consciousness. After being accused of fatalism in *Thunderstorm*, he effectively stressed his optimism in the last act of *Sunrise*, when he made the workers sing as the sun

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rises. But even in the portrayal of character, he has shown unsurpassed dexterity.

When the war against Japanese aggression broke out in 1937, drama was soon bundled into the publicity-van and was again employed as a loudspeaker. Patriotic repertory companies and the dramatic section of the political department of China's M.O.I. toured through the villages and towns of the interior. The attempt at experimenting with stage art dwindled and the writing of pure drama has not been greatly encouraged. Drama has also served as an effective weapon in time of national crisis in China since the Revolution of 1911. For the duration of the war, the function of drama was to awaken and arouse the people. As most performances were held in the open air, plays with the minimum of costume and practically no scenery were preferred for practical reasons. This led to the creation of street-plays, the best known of which is *Lay Down Your Whip!* To serve their country at this crucial moment, dramatists not only sacrificed their technical equipment, often they had to risk their lives on tour behind the Japanese lines. But they realize that the country depends on them to maintain contact with Chinese people living in the guerrilla areas. One of these plays, written by Miss Ting Ling for the Chinese peasants, was translated into English and produced early last February at Santaniketan, the University of Peace, founded in Bengal by Tagore. Its title is *Reunion*. Professor Aaronson, producer of the play, wrote an article after its performance, saying: "We have not chosen this play just because of its political content. It has strong human interest. It is an episode of contemporary China. It may happen every day in the areas occupied by the Japanese troops. We do not wish to foment hatred towards the Japanese, but we hope to make it manifest how aggression can destroy the well-being of humanity."

## ESSAY: CHISEL OR SWORD

Of all forms of modern writing, the nearest to the Chinese literary tradition is the essay. This remark is by no means a compliment. The Chinese for "essay" is either *san wen*, meaning loose, non-metrical writing, or *hsiao p'in wen*, meaning little appreciation; both of which imply the absence of strict form. There are no epics in Chinese poetry and our national music has often been described as melody without harmony. Many of our novels tend to be documentary, they record life rather than reproduce it. There is a distinct lack of architectural beauty in Chinese literature; perhaps the flatness of our continent is to blame, perhaps stoical Confucianism. The essay, however, is admittedly suited to the kind of individualism fostered partly by Taoism throughout the ages. One of our leading essayists defines the modern essay as "the quintessence of personal literature, with all elements submerged in the soul of the creator". So the Chinese writer feels completely at home in the essay.

This loose form of writing is sometimes considered as a "primer" for the literary novice. While editing the Literary Supplement of *Takungpao*, in Tientsin, Shanghai and Hongkong, I received a large number of manuscripts daily. Of these, usually more than half were essays, sketches or "reportage" as they were later fashionably called. These were mostly descriptions of daily happenings, often reminiscent in character. They were excellent stepping-stones for an ambitious novelist, as miniature painting is to full-length canvas. But when they became a vogue, they tended to breed idleness. Now, in war

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time, few writers can sit down and concentrate on a novel, which requires vision and imagination to materialize. Hence, reportage appears to be the most popular form of writing at present. It is not only a convenient form for the writer, but easy reading for the common people. When an essay had to be shortened, the term "wall writing" came into being.

The most common form of essay in classical literature is the "scrapbook" type, and it still remains a favourite to-day. In *Miscellaneous Notes of a Mountain Trip* a writer may freely jot down notes about his rambles, the caves he explored, some casual remark about a book he read or some fleeting fancy while taking a meditative walk. "Letters" used to be another kind of miscellaneous writing until Miss Ping Hsin wrote her *Letters to My Young Readers*. They were contemplative and lyrical, and written with a deliberate plan. In 1924, Yü Ta-fu unconventionally wrote *An Open Letter To A Literary Youth* which was really a subtle satire. He understandingly analysed the situation of a college graduate who was unable to find a job—a very common predicament in those days. In one passage he eloquently exhorted him to rob, for "what is booty to the present society will be your fair share in the future one".

Even in this native art, influence from the West is not to be discounted altogether. The late Liang Yü-ch'ün, translator of *Selected English Essays*, borrowed Jerome K. Jerome's *Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow* for the title of a collection of his own essays which were clearly influenced by Elia. Li Kwang-t'ien is an admirer of W. H. Hudson and a lover of "a simple and intimate world". The vogue of "poems in prose" was definitely set by Turgenev. Even Lu Hsün, who generally appeared too intellectual to write lyrical compositions, could not help adopting this form for his *Wild Grass*. The influence

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of Baudelaire led young Chinese essayists into more elaborate labyrinths.

There are two types of essayists in China, the hermit and the knight-errant. The hermit essayist employs his pen as a sculptor does his chisel. He is often self-centred and sentimental. At heart, he is probably a Narcissist. He emotionalizes a bamboo hut he inhabited several years ago, or mourns over the death of a bird which gave him pleasure. The subject-matter is often trivial personal recollections, lyrically woven, the very fruit and mainspring of human nostalgia. In the first number of *Jén Chien Shih*, a magazine containing mostly essays, Dr. Lin Yü-tang, the editor, announced that his magazine would cover all subjects, "vast as the universe and trifling as a fly". One critic remarked that they caught the fly but completely missed the universe. To the knight-errant, an essay is a simple medium. It is a sword when the enemy is near and a spear when he is afar. While the chisel is good at chipping and carving, the primary virtue of a sword is sharpness. Critical essays, whether on social or literary subjects, never failed to be sardonic. Essays of appreciation do exist, but when an essay is used as a weapon, it must hit something. The interesting fact is that these two types of essays are best represented by writers who happened to be brothers—namely, Chou Tso-jên and Lu Hsün.

Being an admirer of Havelock Ellis, a painstaking translator and a fine scholar, Chou Tso-jên began as a modern rebel in a mandarin robe, calm, leisurely, but at first wholeheartedly supporting everything progressive. He did a great deal to introduce the literature of lesser-known countries in China, from the Baltic to the Balkans. But soon his individualism drove him towards the path of a perfect hermit. From his

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famous "Bitter Rain Studio" he wrote as an antiquarian and a connoisseur of wine, tea and fine letter-papers. At the time when the entire nation was enraged by the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, he built himself a little oasis, surrounded by the aroma of the past. To him, the importance of life had become a mere collection of souvenirs. He is one of the rebels who was unfortunately tamed by harsh reality. It might be a comfortable retreat for a middle-aged man, but its effect on Chinese youth was extremely unhealthy.

In the complete works of Lu Hsün published posthumously, there are four volumes of fiction but fourteen volumes of critical essays. Some critics think the genius of Lu Hsün was wasted in the writing of those essays. And since the subject-matter of most of them has an ephemeral interest, it is doubtful how long they will live. But Lu Hsün never sought immortality in such compositions. Being the chief moving spirit of his age, he could not refrain from attacking things and people he thought rotten. His very first volume of critical essays, *The Hot Wind*, contained a number of curt, poignant essays satirizing superstition, mental platitude, concubinage and all the sloppy side of our national life in the beginning of the republic. He disapproved of writers who painted rosy pictures in the midst of darkness, who "have no courage to face the reality of existing society, but coyly welcome the magpie (Chinese symbol for good luck) and shun the owl (ominous), choosing only agreeable things to distract themselves". Lu Hsün demanded of Chinese writers the courage "to laugh, to weep, to curse and to strike. In this damned society, all these are matter for essays." His works represent the robust, analytical and satirical types. Decorativeness and lyricism were what he most despised. "At this hour when the

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windstorm roars outside and tigers and wolves are clamouring for our lives, who is in a mood to appreciate a coral ear-ring or an emerald ringlet! Even if our people desire some visual delight, they wish to see the great solid mansions standing firm on its foundations against the windstorm." There is no doubt that such critical essays written in an intellectual mood have since become a very popular form of writing. Most literary magazines have several such "editorial paragraphs" on the front page, and after the death of Lu Hsün, a bi-monthly called *Lu Hsün Wind* appeared in Shanghai. "Wind" is also metaphorical Chinese for "style".

The classification of essays may be closely paralleled with that of painting, viz. landscape, human figures, flowers, birds and insects, with the sole exception of "ideas". Of these, the favourite subject is landscape. There are many sacred mountains in the four corners of China and almost all over lake districts. Many delightful essays were devoted to them, either in Chinese ink, such as those by Yeh Shao-chün and Chu Tze-ch'ing, or in western water-colour, such as Hsu Chih-mo, Lu Li, and Li Ni. There has been a tendency towards "surrealism" in essays before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, such as Ho Chi-fang's *Painted Dream* which won the literary prize of *Takungpao* in 1936. But on the whole, most of them are very like miniature paintings, that is, simple sketches of what one sees, remembers or thinks.

Decorative beauty had always been one of the cardinal virtues of traditional "pien" essays. In Ho Chi-fang's *Painted Dream* one sees the assimilation of the native art and the "poem in prose" introduced from abroad. Being a student of philosophy, Ho's essays naturally have strong contemplative colour. In an autobiographical essay, entitled "The Essay and

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I", published in the Literary Supplement of the *Takungpao*, he revealed that he was seeking a new kind of lyrical prose, wrought of pure harmony and beauty. His Preface to *The Painted Dream* began thus:

"‘Are not our visual and auditory senses most miserably limited?’

‘Yes. One summer, I was walking with a colour-blind man on the farm. Casually I plucked a red flower for him and he said it was blue.’

‘And did you grieve for him?’

‘No, I was really sorry for myself.’

‘Then you must believe in mysteries!’

‘I am indeed fond of imagining things remote—some non-existent people or names of nations not to be found on the map. For many days and nights I have lost myself completely in a fresco and walked into it. The wall was white but the portals were of gold. I did not know whether it was the door to Heaven or to Hell, but it opened once for me.’

‘Then your outlook on life . . .?’

‘In life, I am only moved by its expressions. I am like a wisp of floating cloud. I like this to serve as a footnote for all my essays. . . .’

Ou Yang Ching, a critic, remarked that Ho’s attempt to make his words dance like poetry instead of walking like prose was a mistake. It only made them sound awkward. “Ho’s use of artificial elements in his essays has been too lavish. We may sometimes be intoxicated by his array of pigments, designs and allusions. But the fascination of words alone cannot make a work live. It is he himself who has fallen into the labyrinth of words; hence, he lacks what we expect of him most, namely, vitality. While reading his works, I think of a certain biographer’s remark on the Pre-Raphaelite poets: poor splendid wings!”

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But it did not take long for Ho to acquire that vitality. One year after the publication of *The Painted Dream*, the war broke out. Ho was compelled to leave Tientsin where he was teaching. He returned to his home in Ssüchuan. The style of his *Return of the Native: A Diary* appeared far more lucid. Instead of the "expressions of life", meaning probably the abstract side only, he saw the incompetent rural quacks, the unjustly exploited peasants, and found that "this community formed by human beings is actually a dim, dirty and depressing little hell. I must write a book to prove that all other animals can make a better life than we human creatures do. Ideals, love, beauty and joy are what we find in books. They make us feel tender when sad and tearful when happy. But they are rare in the actual human world. I used to be accustomed to misery and squalor as a child, but by reading books, a golden door of illusion opened to me. After that I did all I could to avoid and forget the realities of this world. I loitered in a non-existent world. There must be an awakening after every dream, but mine comes rather too abruptly."

Shortly after, this author of *The Painted Dream* accompanied a group of political workers to the front. They walked several thousands of miles on foot across the plain of north China, seeing more misery, more stupidity and the indescribable fortitude of the Chinese peasants, whose heroism and endurance could not fail to move any sensitive writer. He came back with a volume entitled *The New Shansi*. The change in style and outlook was even more striking than in his *Diary*. His complete transformation is profoundly symptomatic of the effect of Japanese invasion on modern Chinese literature. The war has toughened the spirit of our writers and cemented their relationship with the soil and the people.

## TRANSLATION: AN ETERNAL VOGUE

EARLY in 1919, Professor Lo Chia-lun wrote that the literary revolution was the direct result of China's contact with western culture. In historical perspective, this is undeniably true. The writing of nineteenth-century European thinkers inspired individual awakening in China. The unequal treaties imposed on us by the western powers set flame to Chinese nationalism. These in fact are the principal changes, internal and external, which took place in China in the last fifty years or more. In stirring up the revolt against the traditional style, Wordsworth's Preface to the Lyrical Ballads was a vital source of inspiration. It upheld the vulgar tongue. Above all, many contemporary writers in China are admirers of western masters. Many of them do not know any foreign language. Hence, the translation of western literature has been a work of paramount importance from the beginning of the new movement.

Besides the influence of English literature itself, the unchallenged popularity of the English language in China has had beneficial results. Many European masterpieces otherwise unavailable even to Chinese translators, such as Ibsen and Hans Andersen, were retranslated from English versions. It has often been said that Russian novels enjoy a pre-eminent popularity in China. They have certainly exerted great influence over our writers. This is not difficult to understand. Nineteenth-century Tsarist Russia, with all its social backwardness in contrast to a conscientious, progressive intellectual class, was similar to the situation in China during the

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civil war. Russian novels, especially those of Tolstoy, ponderous in size, moralistic in view, often dealing with family tragedies, naturally had a special appeal for Chinese readers. But throughout the last thirty years there have been only two or three people in China who translated Russian literature from the original. Most of them were retranslations from English versions such as those of Mrs. Constance Garnett.

In this little essay I have given a rough sketch of western influence over the various fields of writing in modern China. Our individual writers have been perfectly teachable. In a collection of autobiographical essays, *Literature And I*, published in 1935, nearly half the contributors appeared to be self-appointed pupils of certain western masters. Hsiao Mo, the pseudonym of a well-known translator, began by describing his first contact with western literature:

"It was like a visit to a strange exotic world, or tasting a glass of curaçao. The particular flavour lured me. My first contact was the *Sketch Book* of Washington Irving. I loved its quaint imagination, and the subtle diction. . . ."

The first contact of Hsi Ju, a story-writer, was with Turgenev's *Father and Son*. "Almost at once, it excited my interest. I read it over and over again, seeing through it the ominous sign of the collapse of the 'father' generation of Tsarist Russia and the courageous scepticism of the 'son' generation. The story was so poignant and so full of life that for once I realized the greatness of art."

Curiously enough, our earliest translator of western literature was unfamiliar with any western language. Lin Ch'in-nan was one of the old diehards who stubbornly opposed the literary revolution. Being a classical scholar himself, his

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translations, though often inaccurate, read extremely well in Chinese. He had a collaborator who translated to him verbally. Between 1890 to his death in 1924, he had translated some one hundred and thirty western works, including *La Dame Aux Camélias*, Scott's *Ivanhoe*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and the *Pickwick Papers*. Sketchy and faulty as they were, they were the first arrivals of European literature in China. Lin's translation of Lamb's *Tales From Shakespeare* aroused so much curiosity among the young Chinese that many rushed to learn English in order to read the original plays. The fact that Chinese readers without the faintest knowledge of England shed tears in those days over the misfortunes of David Copperfield and laughed at jolly Sam Weller proved that great literature has no barrier. Since then, we ceased to regard Europe as a great armament factory.

Up to 1932, we can safely say that most translations were enthusiastically but casually done. Our knowledge of the literary history of the world was also scanty. It was then solely a matter of personal interest and often the work overlapped. As a result, some books had several translations while many classics were left untranslated. To translate the complete works of certain established authors has always been the ambition, such as Kuo Mo-jo's Goethe and J. M. Synge, Chao Ching-shen's Chekov, and Li Ch'ing-ya's Maupassant. Nevertheless there are limitations to personal effort and few achieved their aim. Subsequently there was a tendency to turn to the authors of the moment, such as Upton Sinclair for a time, and later, Mrs. Pearl Buck.

It was realized that this state of affairs was far from satisfactory. Early in 1918, Dr. Hu Shih suggested that western classics should be translated systematically. He proposed to

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allot five years for each period, during which a series of well-chosen works, say 100 novels, 500 short stories, 300 plays and works of 500 essayists were to be translated. However, various circumstances hindered this excellent plan until a few years before the outbreak of the war. Early in the last decade, two plans were launched. One was the *China Foundation Series of English Literature* under the editorship of Dr. Hu Shih. It contained the retranslation of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, his *Return of the Native* by Professor Chang Ko-jo, Liang Yü-ch'un and Yuan Chia-hua's novels of Joseph Conrad, Pien Chih-lin's *Queen Victoria* of Lytton Strachey, and the complete works of Shakespeare by Professor Liang Shih-ch'iu which war has interrupted. The other attempt was Professor Cheng Chen-to's *World Classics*, a selection which covered European literature in general. The first series, for instance, included Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Gogol's *Dead Souls*, Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Unlike previous translations, they were made by well-chosen scholars who undertook their task not by virtue of zeal alone but by their competence in both languages. Nearly every work was preceded by a lengthy Introduction and followed by a carefully compiled glossary. For instance, in translating Hardy's *Return of the Native*, Professor Chang devoted nearly one-quarter of the two huge volumes to detailed annotations of such things as the English wild flowers appearing in the novel. He also made an ingenious attempt to translate Wessex dialect into the dialect of his home in western Shantung.

After finishing the Victorian and Georgian classics, our translators will certainly seize the first opportunity to transplant the finest flowers of contemporary English literature.

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We know there are no more Robin Hoods on the highways of the British Isles and the children are far better taken care of than in Dickens's days. But we wish to know all this more profoundly and in greater detail. We must read the living authors of contemporary England. Conversely, great changes have taken place in China, even in the last five years. There is one side of national life which is static, and another which is fluid—the mood, the attitude, and the inner voice of a people. This fluid side is generally expressed in the contemporary writing of that people.

The war which the Japanese expected to be so profitable has brought them little benefit. But it has dealt a heavy blow to the general cultural activities in China. The Rising Sun Bombers destroyed the last copy of Shakespeare in a college library. The shortage of paper made publication almost unattainable. And constant air raids on the undefended towns are hardly conducive to the translation of quiet scenes in a novel. War has made a mockery of everything. But it has also made us realize that we need better understanding among nations, to appreciate mutually the agonies, the problems and the aspirations of each nation. The Chinese can no more understand England through *Robinson Crusoe* or *King Lear* than the English can hope to know of dynamic China if they persist in poring over our T'ang poets, who died long before Alfred the Great burned his cakes. Here, I close this short account with a faint protest, and a fervid hope.





